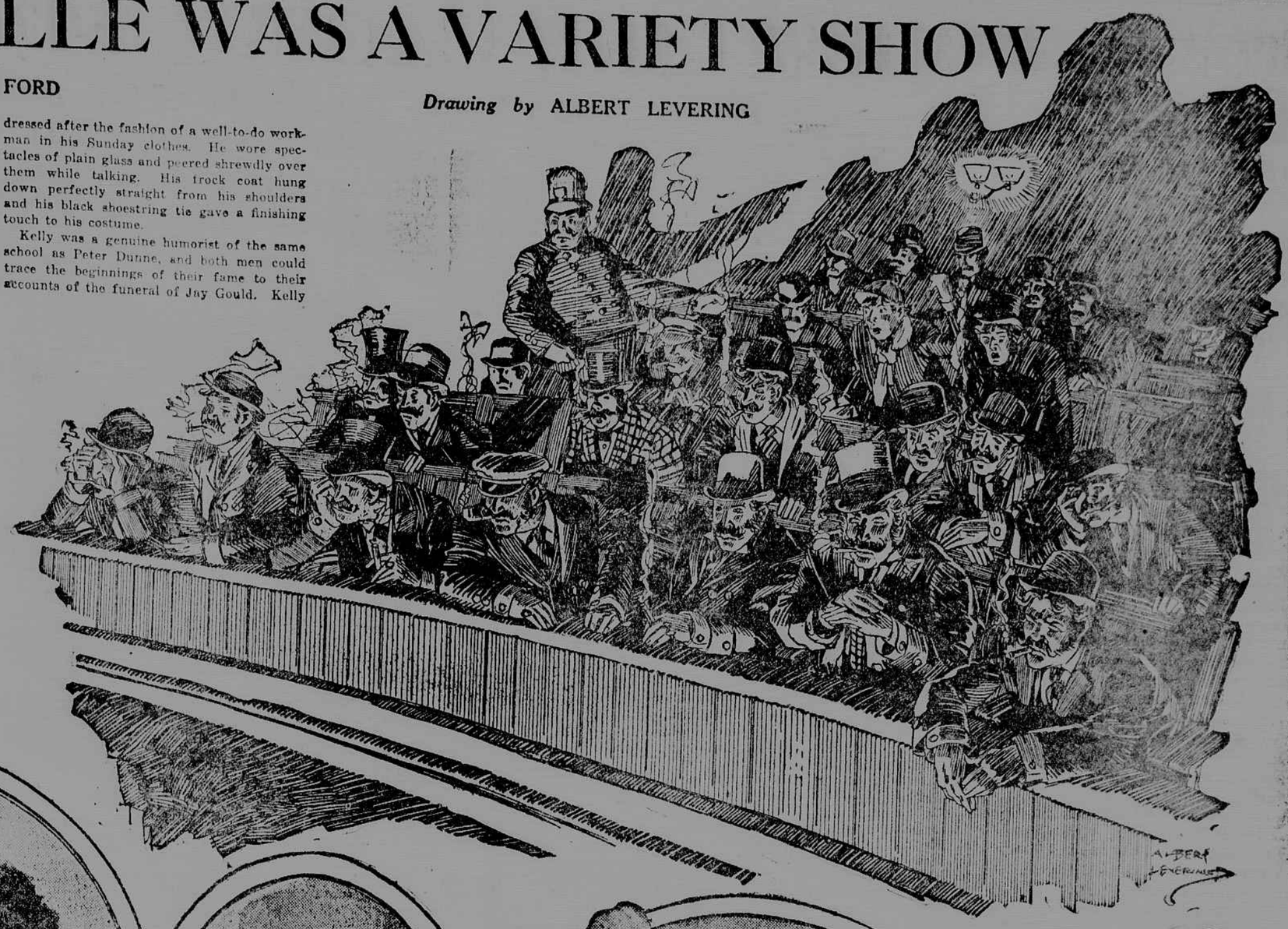
WHEN VAUDEVILLE WAS A VARIETY SHOW

A Page for Old-Timers Who, Like the Author, Are Active Members of the "I-Remember-When" Club. A Page, Also, for Youth, Which Will Never Know What It Missed

By JAMES L. FORD

Drawing by ALBERT LEVERING



WHEN variety became "polite vaudeville" the stage of this country suffered a staggering blow—one that sapped its vitality at its very roots. We have only to look back to the variety programs of an elder day to realize how many players of later popularity and distinction graduated from that forcing bed of talent to take rank in the legitimate theater; and, let it be remembered, variety as an educational force was not limited to the region behind the footlights, for it trained critical appreciation as well as talent, and there are no keener judges of acting at the present moment than those old-time playgoers who knew so well the sound of the admonitory rattan as they sat in the gallery of Pastor's or Miner's and watched the stage with observing eyes.

Critics of the owlish class delight in telling us what Molière did for the French stage and how he endowed theaters for that of Europe, but not one of them realizes that variety worked in the same way and with results similar though cruder in our own country. It would be difficult to find an endowed theater in Germany that was not founded on horse play, usually by an actor famous for his impersonation of the "Hansvurst," the Teutonic equivalent of the British clown, while the Theatre Français is famous for the "team work" in which all variety performers excelled.

Like the great theaters of Europe, our variety stage was founded on farcical humor and its most popular exponents were those who excelled in the noble art of making people laugh and forget their troubles. Some there were who could sing or dance, but it was usually the comedians who graduated into the legitimate ranks of the profession and became national favorites.

It is not easy at this late date to name the playhouse that first used the term "variety," but I believe the credit belongs to one William Valentine, for the story he told me in his later years when he was conducting a pavilion on Coney Island was indorsed by no less an authority than the late Mr. Johnny Wild, whose name appears on the first program offered by Tony Pastor on the opening of his Bowery Theater in 1865. It must have been some time in the '40's that Valentine opened a place of amusement on the East Side, and consulted a friend as to the best title he could give to his enterprise.

"What sort of entertainment are you going to give?" inquired the other.

"Well, I'm going to give them a variety of things," was the reply.

"Then why not call it a variety theater?" asked the friend promptly, and the name was adopted.

Largely speaking, the variety profession was divided into two classes of performers—those associated with one another in teams and those who in the lexicon of their craft "worked alone" and are now known as "monologists." They entertained audiences by different methods, but both tried to squeeze as much amusement into the brief time allowed them as they possibly could, for every "turn" had a specified time allowance, to go beyond which was liable to entail a fine or a mortifying "closing in" of flats to separate them from the audience. As a general thing a team consisted of one man who was actively funny, and a "feeder" who paid such close attention to him and listened so intently to his jokes that he gave his efforts the fullest possible value. So well did these teams work that the average layman did not know which one was funny, and generally gave credit to both. It was by directing attention to one another that they became popular, while the monologist sought to concentrate attention on himself and was usually an imitator rather than an actor.

Thus in the firm of Weber & Fields, Weber was the feeder and Fields the comedian, while in that of Montgomery & Stone, Stone was the entertainer and his partner the feeder, and when that firm headed their own company, with enormous success, it was Stone's loyalty to his old-time partner that prompted him to retain him as an associate and equal sharer in the profits.

Harrigan & Hart gave New York an entertainment that is still a lively memory in many a gray head. Hart was the actor of the two and Harrigan the dramatist, while the feeding was done by the other members of the company, all of whom were graduates of variety.

Of those who "worked alone" I recall with special delight the late John W. Kelly, who styled himself the "Rolling Mill Man" and dressed after the fashion of a well-to-do workman in his Sunday clothes. He wore spectacles of plain glass and peered shrewdly over them while talking. His frock coat hung down perfectly straight from his shoulders and his black shoestring tie gave a finishing touch to his costume.

Kelly was a genuine humorist of the same school as Peter Dunne, and both men could trace the beginnings of their fame to their accounts of the funeral of Jay Gould. Kelly used to comment on the reporter's favorite line, "the cold and silent grave," saying, "he wouldn't want it steam heated or have a brass band playing there, would he?" In the vernacular of his colleagues, Kelly "wrote his own stuff" and, moreover, he was without a peer in the art of delivering it. No joke or story that fell from his lips ever failed to get across the footlight, and in the construction of his little stories there was a close resemblance to the craft of a Sardou.

This ability to get across the footlights is one of the earmarks of the material from which a star is made. It is a quality difficult to describe and one that defies analysis. There are actors highly praised and justly, too, who do not possess it, and there are others, inferior in technical equipment, who do. Were it not for the laws of libel I would mention a few stars who are of the first-named class, and nearly every one of them is losing money for no other reason save their inability to "get across."

What a host of these oldtime entertainers come trooping back to me as I write and how many of them achieved the variety actor's ambition of "getting on Broadway!"

Tony Pastor, the dean of the whole corps, had begun as a clown, played at Barnum's Ann Street museum and won his way to success in management before I came on the turf. He was held in such high esteem that his audiences, the most critical and exacting in the town, permitted him to sing. Part gypsy in blood, he came of a family of circus people, and his brother Frank, the son-in-law of Blondin, the tight-rope walker, was a famous rider in his day. In his evening dress and with a crush hat rakishly perched on his head, and his mustache waxed, Pastor seemed to his gallery patrons a veritable mirror of fashion. His favorite ballad was "The Girl in the Calico Dress."

Harry Miner had in early life wielded a rattan in the gallery of Pastor's Theater, at 201 Bowery, and in later life became a prosperous variety manager. He cultivated a certain chance resemblance to his oldtime employer by waxing his mustache, but he never tried to sing.

Among the best of Pastor's entertainers were Harry and John Kernell, billed as brothers, though there was no blood kinship between the two. They carried on what they called a "sidewalk conversation," feeding one another with such skill as to give each joke—and there were many good ones in their constantly changing repertoire—its full value. Both were Irishmen and each one "worked alone" for a few moments during their turn. I well remember how John used to begin the act by walking suddenly on the stage and saying with an air of disgust: "I'll never wear earmuffs again. I was in Cassidy's saloon the other night with a pair on and Cassidy asked everybody to have a drink and I didn't hear him."

Wild and Gray were also great favorites on the variety stage long before they joined the Harrigan & Hart company. I think their sketch, "The Rival Car Conductors," was the funniest thing I ever saw on any stage. Wild was the creator of the New York darky as distinguished from the plantation negro of minstrelsy, and it was in the character of Captain Primrose of the Skidmore Guards that he is best remembered by old patrons of the Theater Comique. Gray played several parts, chiefly in black face, but one of the most effective of his roles was in white face, that of the old stage doorkeeper of the Bowery Theater, which he played up to the time of his death.

William J. Scanlan, who began, as did many others of his kind, at Harry Hill's dance house, sang for years in variety theaters and finally became a popular star of Irish drama. He is chiefly remembered by his song "Peek-a-Boo." He ended his days sadly enough in a retreat to which he was sent because of his failing faculties, and the cost of his living was defrayed from the profits of that song, cleverly marketed by his devoted wife, who subsequently became Mrs. August Pitou.

A variety actor who afterward became extremely popular on Broadway, as a member of the Weber & Fields company, was Peter F. Dailey, born and bred in New York, of Irish-American caste and humorous both in speech and action. His death was sincerely deplored not only by those who knew him but also by an enormous element in the playgoing public. It is no easy matter to set down in cold type the many gifts that gave Dailey his rogue as one of the "Big Four" variety teams, but they may all be summed up in a single phrase: "He was funny." He could dance like a cork, bring out the humor in a comic song, lead a chorus of girls and interpolate jokes of his own that seldom failed to get a laugh. As each province in Italy had its own comic divinity in early times, so did upper Broadway seek expression of its peculiar humor through the lips of Pete Dailey.

It was Tony Pastor who actually elevated our stage by rescuing variety from its low condition as a dive with waiter girls and barchecks, and although he of necessity paid small salaries, he must have had a keen eye for talent if one may judge from the number of great entertainers who graduated from his school. The best of his performers were expected to do their various turns and then appear in the short sketch that brought the entertainment to a close, and I have seen Lillian Russell, Nat Goodwin, May and Flo Irwin and Jacques Kruger playing together in one of the condensed versions of comic opera—either "Pinafore" or "Olivette"—that were given during Pastor's brief season on Broadway.

Denman Thompson was also a variety actor in his day, and Sadie Martinot, in later years an actress of rare personal charm, filled the inconspicuous post of "chair warmer" on her first appearance in Boston. Francis Wilson was a member of the black-face team of Mackin & Wilson and, unlike most of his associates, used to devote his leisure time to reading and study.

There are a few oldtime playgoers who remember Butler's Theater at 444 Broadway, and the Prismatic Fountain that was considered such a marvel in its time. They recall also J. W. McAndrews, the Water-Melon Man,

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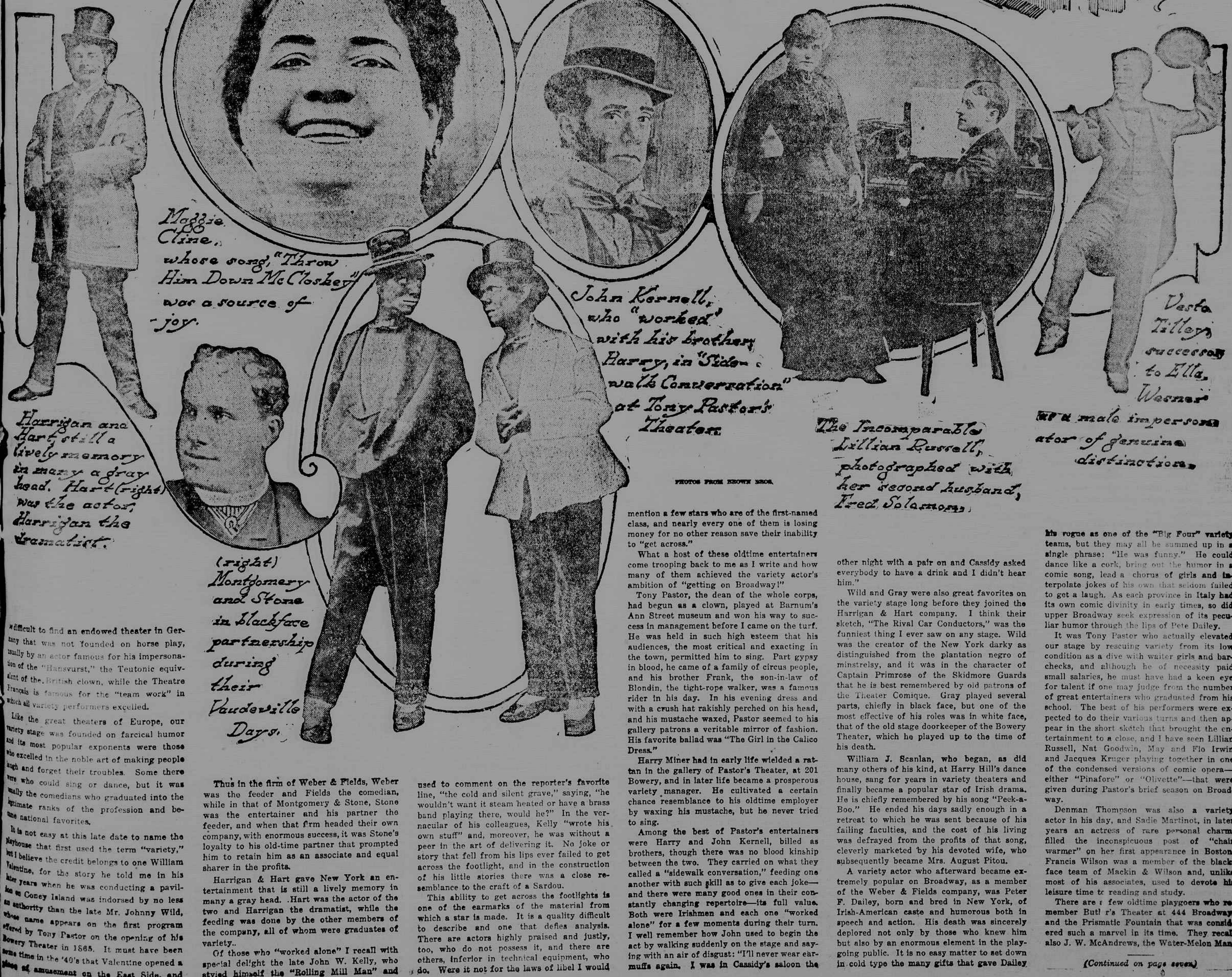

Maggie Cline, whose song, "Throw Him Down McCloskey" was a source of joy.

John Kernell, who "worked" with his brother Harry, in "Sidewalk Conversation" at Tony Pastor's Theater.

Vesta Tilley, successor to Ella Wesner as a male impersonator of genuine distinction.

Harrigan and Hart still a lively memory in many a gray head. Hart (right) was the actor, Harrigan the dramatist.

The Incomparable Lillian Russell, photographed with her second husband, Fred Solamon.

(right) Montgomery and Stone in blackface partnership during their Vaudeville Days.

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